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Things that co-exist

Megan L. Bogonovich

The University of Montana

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Things that co-exist

By

Megan Bogonovich

B.F.A. Maryland Institute College of Art 1999

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

December 2003

Approved by:

[Signature]

Chairperson:

[Signature]

Dean, Graduate School:

1-21-04

Date
Abstract

The thesis show is made up of eleven ceramic sculptures and twelve small colored pencil drawings. The drawings act as plans for potential future sculptures. The format of drawing allows for me to better visualize how an idea will become a physical object. I can go through a lot of trial and error that would not be possible with the clay, which prefers I have a clear plan. The sculptural works all went through a series of drawings before being actualized in clay.

The sculptures were created between August and December of 2003, making these works very new to me. Often it is difficult for artists to truly understand what motivated their own art when it is so fresh. A great deal of the process is sub-conscious. What struck me when seeing the work together for the first time was how autobiographical the narrative had become. Without being aware of my motives I had used much of the work as a format to deal with the monkeys on my back. I could see myself trying to understand my personal relationships through the characters that I had created. The show now reads to me as a tongue-in-cheek diary of my last year.

When creating work for the show there were themes that I consciously knew I wanted to address. Most prevalent of these themes, being a sort of search for balance that most Americans are deeply engaged in. There are constant contradictions in the American life. An effort to maintain an honest and good life is in opposition to the homogenous, mass-marketed thrust of our culture. It would be dishonest not to admit that hours of television, fast-food meals, cell phones and strip malls are just as much a part of our lives as nature, spirituality and family. It seems right to me to make a piece of art that pairs two opposing elements and considers how it is that these two co-exist.

Having made my art in an academic setting, I think a portion of the content is about asking the question, what is art? By selecting clay as my medium, I have accepted a genre of art that is seeped in tradition and technique. With the thesis pieces I have decided to follow some classic ceramic traditions and technically, I have strived for quality craftsmanship.
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Introduction

In art school and graduate school, I learned the most through the feedback I received during critique. This dialogue with peers and professors provided an opportunity to share the work in its early and intermediate stages and to begin to find clarity of thought through speaking. In an art education, the critique is the first chance to find out which elements of the artist’s constant inner dialogue have successfully been visually communicated to the viewer. It is a time to defend one’s work, make unlikely connections, and establish priorities. This system of question and answer, through essay questions, pop quizzes and exams is a staple of academia. Answering questions is a common responsibility of the student and also of the artist.

This show has generated a free-form critique of individuals asking me specific questions of the show. The questions apparently address what the show does not answer visually and therefore needs to be addressed verbally. I would like to use this thesis as an opportunity to consider these questions and provide answers.
How do the abstract forms relate to the realistic?

I am interested in irrational thought, the kind of thinking that goes on in daydreams, ideas and imagery that connects non-sequentially. So much of our thinking is non-linear. One thing reminds us of another and in no time we’ve gone from avalanches to hula-dancers to algebra, to the smell of nutmeg. This is an important kind of thinking that leads us to unexpected places. The first way that the forms relate is as a type of visual non-linear thought.

The second way the abstract forms relate to the realistic is as a play on the nature of illusion. There are flat forms painted to create the sense of three-dimensionality placed next to forms that are actually three-dimensional. In the same piece one form is pretending to be real, right next to another form that isn’t required to be anything but what it is. Which one of the two is actually more realistic if the abstract form is allowed to be a clay shape whereas, the realistic portion, which is just as much a clay shape, has to pretend that it is a human figure? So, within the pieces there is a dialogue between abstraction and realism, between forms that have a direct noun association (cheerleaders and swans) and forms that are operating in a separate non-verbal realm. In “Comically Small” realism mocks cliché phallic abstraction. In “Irreverent Without Being Crude” realism lovingly serenades abstraction. In “Strategy for Daily Living” realism emerges from abstraction.

At first the forms feel very different. They seem at odds with the desire to make a harmonious artwork. But if art is to reflect life, what better way to express American culture then to create a piece loaded with contradictions? In a single day the amount of
times we shift from a genuine pure experience to an artificial homogenous experience can be overwhelming. Let me create a day. Perhaps we wake up and feed the baby, then get into a car and drive on the freeway, the cell phone rings, we speak with our grandmother, we go through a drive-through and eat fast food, later we walk alone along a wooded path leading to a beautiful vista, on the trip home we anticipate spending time with the person we love, perhaps we will invite this person to see the new Jackie Chan film. This is a perfectly feasible day yet, so full of opposites. An experience that feels unique and organic pressed against a mass-marketed mechanically produced experience. These two opposing factors co-exist in our lives. We try to create a balance and remain good people in a world where television, strip malls, and processed food are just as much a part of our experience as nature, spirituality and family. Rather than ignoring popular culture’s influence, I would like my work to explore and examine it as substantial, relevant, and important. In the sculptures, the abstract forms stand in for the organic experience and the realistic forms represent the commercial. By placing the two together, I would like my work to consider the meaning, influences, and ethics of popular culture and how it’s ever-present force plays against the sincere and pure experiences we long for. I want to consider how it is that the two co-exist and if it is possible to have a profound aesthetic experience in Wal-mart.

The process of making the work mirrors this comparison of the organic versus the mechanical experience. In the sculptures there is an abstract element that is made through a repetitive and meditative process. And there is an opposing element that is tightly rendered and made by imitating source material. By working this way I continue to find the same balance in the art making process that I look for in life.
Why are the figures flat?

The figures in the sculptures are intended to represent our known physical world. They are examples of the visual culture that a media driven world presents to us. These characters are not multi-dimensional. They are not psychologically complex. These are characters we find on billboards, in markets campaigns, on television, in the music industry, in Playboy. Often they are trying to sell us something. Their attitude, their posturing, their dress speaks to us directly and we are able to understand every facet of their being just by looking at them. Rather than being an individual they are a type.

In “Honey from the Icebox” the boating couple is known to us. They are from the seventies, a time free of sexual anxiety. She is beautiful and reminds us of Farrah Fawcett. He is handsome and reminds us of Don Johnson. They are taking part in a romantic activity worthy of the movies. We can sense the flawlessness of their bliss. But this characterization is an illusion and the piece brings this reality to our attention by tipping the flat boat and forcing it into the three-dimensional realm. The boat sinks into a frilly footstool, a piece of silly and whimsical furniture that appears to mock the decorative and unsubstantial nature of the couple’s relationship.

All of the figures in the show are based on photos that have circulated in the media. I felt that there was honesty in maintaining the flatness of these characters that initially came to me in a flat form. They do not claim to be invented, unique or original individuals they are reproductions. The fact that they are flat heightens the contrast between them and the three-dimensional, often abstract form. It is necessary that the paired forms contradict each other. One form is three-dimensional; the other has only the painted illusion of three-dimensionality.
Why are so many of the forms white?

When I first began these pieces I expected each sculpture to be a riot of color. I thought they would be bright and pulsating with acid hues. It was viewer’s reaction to the color that made me change my palette. I found that the more color the pieces had the less weight they held with viewers. Although the works were never intended to be intensely serious, I did want the audience to spend some time with each piece. The presence of the stark white might bring to mind ancient marble sculpture or minimalist interiors. In effect, the white might make the viewer think beyond the humor of the work.

Having a strong color shift between the elements of the sculpture also serves to separate and define each part. The two pieces engage in a more interesting dialogue when they are different. In the piece “Irreverent Without Being Crude” the banjo player is serenading a long bulbous form that arches to hear the tune. The banjo Player may be the more realistically rendered of the pair, but in this situation it is he that plays the more cartoonish role. The musician is dressed in red and white stripes. He bears a goofy eager-to-please expression. The abstract form however, appears to bend in earnest curiosity. I believe that it is the form’s white coloring and our association of white to innocence and purity that enhances the sincerity of its gesture.
What role do the animals play in the sculptures?

The animals in the sculptures are stand-ins for human attributes and emotions. We have a shared understanding of what each animal symbolizes. Regardless of what biology may otherwise indicate we all know that swans are graceful, owls are wise, cats are curious, eagles are brave, and lions are noble. Not only are snakes sinister but also we will probably never forgive them for pushing that apple on Eve. Fables and children’s books are filled with moralistic stories that tell the reader which animals are best to align themselves with. A race between a tortoise and a hare presents two opposing life philosophies and suggests which of the two is the wiser approach.

In “Penny Dreadfuls” a pair of alligators face the viewer. The alligators are eating their own environment. The animals in this situation stand in for the human desire to greedily consume, disregarding the fact that this ceaseless consuming may be to humanities own detriment.
Are the pieces supposed to be funny?

Humor provides the introduction to these sculptures. The bright colors, quirky relationships, and goofy characters create a friendly atmosphere that makes the pieces approachable. Each sculpture incorporates a known element, a character that the viewer has experienced before, a clown, monkeys, a little girl, then places that known element into an unknown environment. The same way that it would be funny to attend a business meeting in a bunny suit, these pieces use the humor formula of a stranger in a strange land.

For me, this approach to art making is an inevitable result of my approach to life. I prefer situations to be amusing. I like to see people laugh. I often joke that my entire personality is built on a big stack of defense mechanisms. For better or for worse, using humor to lessen the potential anxiety of a situation has always worked for me. Not only does it work, but I am constantly surprised by how much I can get away with if I make it lighthearted. Using humor in art is comparable to Mary Poppins’s spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down.

Art is a great place for people to indulge in nonsense, to let go of logic and order and play with the absurd. The piece “Girlhood Scenario” shows a little girl doing just that. She is standing in a ridiculous imaginary garden and taking great care to nurture it and make sure that it grows. The stripes of her shirt are repeated in the abstract forms of the garden suggesting that she is not so completely different from these illogical shapes.
Why are the pieces displayed on pedestals?

Sculptors today alter the gallery and otherwise create the space that the sculpture will live in, or a piece is built with a specific space in mind. Many sculptors have no consistent material rather; the material is selected based on the concept behind the physical object. Much of contemporary sculpture has thrown out the conventions of pedestals and a single media. In this way the field of ceramics is perhaps less avant-garde. Ceramicists are content to work with one material and the use of the pedestal feels appropriate for clay. The pedestal provides a protective service to a fragile object and it physically elevates work that usually is not monumental in scale.

The convention of the pedestal is built into several of the pieces and acts as a vital third element. In “Comically Small” the ceramic pedestal is the required link to connect a pair of forms that would otherwise appear disconnected. The pedestal is created to specifically fit the forms and it makes clear my intention that these two forms must co-exist. The presence of the pedestal within the sculpture lets the audience know the sculpture itself is aware that it is art. Instead of trying to transcend object hood, the ornamental pedestal pokes fun at arts ultimately decorative nature.
What is the storyline?

Each piece in the show contains a narrative. Anytime a recognizable form, especially the human form, is depicted in an artwork a story is implied. So much character development can happen just with the figure alone. Artists from John Singer Sargent to Elizabeth Peyton have made careers out of telling an entire story through the portrayal of a single individual. The figure’s dress, expression, and posture can be powerful storytellers.

I like to imagine my characters as actors in a paused melodrama. The pieces set up scenarios and invite the viewer to reconstruct what might have lead to such a situation. Although I have my own ideas about what is going on, how much of my personal storyline comes across is not important to me as long as there is enough information presented that the viewer can create their own drama.

Additionally, I do not feel that the narrative has to be formulated in a linear fashion. The character’s relationships could be simply that they are the same color or they are both striped. Like performers in a dance, the relationship could be that they are bending in opposite directions. The possibility of a viewer seeing a form as making no sense is okay too. One can never be sure when a piano is going to fall from the sky and land at one’s feet.

The piece “Lousy Science Fiction” alters the art historical standard of the Botticelli Venus in the shell. Instead this piece fills the shell with a pair of pre-historic humanoids and a pile of gold amorphic shapes. The couple looks confused and awkward in their environment. These disparate elements of shell, figures, and forms came together as a
loose storyline in my head. I have always found the early humanoid “Lucy” compelling. Where scientists discovered her bones they also unearthed two sets of fossilized tracks. These tracks were so close together that scientists inferred that Lucy must have had a companion that walked so close to her side that they must have been touching. I loved the introduction of romance to this scientific discovery. The possibility that Lucy was in love seemed so romantic to me and gave her the kind of beauty that made her worthy of the Botticelli shell. But, Lucy and her boyfriend lived in a very different time. I imagined the pair traveling forward in time, wading through all that humanity would become. Their faces would carry expressions of confusion, maybe fear or awe. Their movement would slow as all of humanity’s stuff piled at their feet. The stuff wouldn’t make sense to them, the forms would be abstract, but they would be shiny and new.
What do the titles mean?

Language has consistently been a source of inspiration for me. I like puns, clever phrasing, nonsense words, lists, rhymes, and eavesdropping on conversations. Visualizing the phrase “monkeys on my back” was the starting point for the piece “Things that Co-exist”. I have favorite words: well, accoutrement, taco, holy mackerel, bold, deluge, seventy-four, asinine. I have least favorite words: baton and entrée. I keep a list of things that I like in no particular order. I keep a list of last sentences in novels, and if a phrase catches my eye when I’m reading, I have a list of those too. Phrases like “doing and deserving”, “an old problem” and “hilarious funeral” often turn up again later as titles or they act as a starting point for imagery.

I found the word “tricknology” in the novel Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides. In the context of the novel the word was spoken by a manipulative Muslim preacher in a black Chicago community. Tricknology was the term the preacher used to explain what the white man employed to keep the black man down. The word stuck in my head and it wasn’t long before I was noticing tricknology all around me, on the evening news, prescription drug commercials, celebrity gossip magazines, telemarketer phone calls, credit card offers in my mailbox. This constant manipulation disguised as fact. The word lead me to make a piece that focused on a celebrity completely consumed by tricknology. Lil’ Kim is a rap star whose fame is based on self-promotion, trash talk, fake breasts, money, shocking behavior and skimpy outfits. I don’t want to say that this is a woman who lacks sincerity or goodness. I just want to put her on a pedestal and wonder how it is that she exists. What does this culture create and why? Using tricknology as the title might re-direct viewers and get them to ask a similar question.
How are the pieces made?

Most of my work is fired in an electric kiln to cone six. This firing method allows me to go into a piece with a clear idea of what result I want. The electric kiln is ideal for bright colors, sharp whites and less unintentional surprises. Atmospheric kilns tend to make decisions for you during the firing and the colors are often brown or earthy.

I am happy with the results I’ve achieved using Duncan Cover Coat commercial underglazes on porcelain. I cut the outline of the figure out of a slab of clay in the same way a cookie cutter stamps out hearts and stars, giving me a surface on which I can render the figure. This flat surface allows me to play with creating the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality in the same way a painter works on canvas. The under glaze is applied to the form like any painting, only keeping in mind that some of the colors alter and all of the colors darken and brighten in the kiln.

Elements of the sculptures are frequently hand built with smaller repetitive elements added individually. When I am able to use the wheel to simplify the construction of a form I do so. The basic forms of several of the bases begin as simple bowl shapes, which are then flipped over and altered using carving tools.

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<th>David’s Porcelain</th>
<th>Rebecca’s Matte White</th>
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Which artists influenced the work?

Marcel Dzama and Kathy Butterly are two artists that I have admired for a couple years. Kathy Butterly makes small ceramic vessels, about five to six inches tall. The pieces are happy and colorful. They are made up of a chaotic assemblage of parts. In the spirit of many post-modern artists, Butterly combines sharp edges with curvy, representation forms with abstract, shiny surfaces with matte, warm colors with cool, intricate detail with loose movement. She makes the vessel form entirely new and contemporary.

Marcel Dzama makes small narrative watercolors. He produces extraordinary amounts of them and coats gallery walls from ceiling to floor. The characters that he creates are influenced by a broad range of sources, from Dante to The Wizard of Oz, but he tweaks the storyline in such a way to make the characters uniquely his own. Trees that have come to life battle cowboys, bears get in line with dancing girls and do high kicks, magicians slice cartoonish alligators in two, Flappers innocently strolling along are pursued by bats with human heads, creatures rise from the sea and curiously observe boaters. The imagery is both innocent, bringing to mind children’s books, and sinister. Characters are put in perilous fantastical situations, as if they have stepped out of their intended storyline and into a vintage horror film. Marcel Dzama’s artwork feels like an accurate portrayal of the inconsistency of contemporary life, shifting from Disneyland to high school shootings.

Italian ceramicists Bertozzi and Casoni are recent discoveries for me. Their pieces appear to be traditional decorative figurines until the viewer notices that the Virgin Mary is mowing the lawn. These finely crafted porcelain artworks display an irreverence and wit that I admire.
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